

THE RELIGION OF THE FUTURE.¹

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AS FAR BACK as we may go among the savage tribes, religion has a two-fold character. It signifies an act of intelligence and an act of sentiment. It is at once emotion and knowledge. The word "knowledge" should not astonish us, even as applied to the miserable hordes whose religious life consists wholly of a few absurd beliefs and of a few rules for the practice of sorcery. Man has at all times and in all places put the same questions regarding the world and himself, and he has given to these questions answers which are nearly alike and which reveal a common psychological condition, of varying infantile and grotesque forms. The mythologies of nations having not the remotest resemblance to one another are clear witness of this, and the patient study which has been made of their fables has placed it beyond the shadow of a doubt.² The crudest mythologies contain some explanation of the facts of existence; they are at bottom real philosophies, in which the sentiment of their believers finds its inspiration, and by which they regulate their conduct.

In their origin, therefore, morals, science, and metaphysics are embodied indiscriminately in mythology, and each mythology represents for a greater or less period of time the entire intellectual or sentimental life of the people which has produced it. The natural consequence is that religion increases according as intelligence and morality develop, up to the point where it ultimately absorbs in one single scheme all philosophy, all law, and even politics itself. We have examples of this in the ancient Hindu, Greek, and Latin community, and notably so in Islamism, where, as we know, everything in society is religious.

¹ Extracts from advance proofs of a forthcoming book *Les croyances de demain* (*The Beliefs of To-morrow*). Paris, 1898.

² See Andrew Lang, *Custom and Myth*,

At this stage, however, the opposite process of dissolution and analysis begins. The human mind breaks in places the enchanted circle in which its ignorance is confined. It applies to fundamental questions, which its curiosity is never tired of probing, methods that are no longer based on theology; and the religious authority, weakened day by day, seeks henceforward to rescue certain principles only, which it deems absolutely necessary to its existence.

So, for example, the Church among Christian peoples continues to regulate the conduct of life, even after the scientific establishment of its doctrines has fallen from its grasp. To-day the grave problems of moral evolution, of freedom, of obligation, of sanction, have been surrendered to the researches of philosophers. Many believers, in fact, will not admit of the possibility of a deviation of faith from science. But the theory and the instruments of morals are not the same in all religions. The Buddhists, the Christians, the Mussulmans profess doctrines which differ widely on the questions of free will, divine action, and future life; so that no particular solution appears really essential to religious living, apart from the Church which imposes it. Religion, *qua* knowledge, has played its part, and the dogmas which the different theologies are wont to superimpose upon positive knowledge have no influence upon the general progress of thought.

When we come to examine, on the other hand, the religious *emotion*, it will be seen that it is quite complex, that it is composed of fear, pity, admiration, and intelligent curiosity. It differs with individuals and with the degree of civilisation. It exhibits widely distinctive traits in a François D'Assise and a Vincent de Paul, in a Kepler, a Pascal, and a Leibnitz. Even the sentiment of the Divine, which some people take to be the essence of religion, is never so spontaneous but it depends both on our passions and our type of mind. The religious emotion, in a word, is an efflorescence of both our feeling and thinking ego. It takes color from our hypotheses or from our dreams concerning the ways of the universe. Religion, *qua* sentiment, springs, therefore, also from the knowledge which we have of the world; our religious emotion, too, is connected with our mentality.

Differing from one another by their sentiment of the divine and by their philosophy, the three great universal religions which share the empire of souls yet offer striking similarities and are alike in two leading ideas to which it seems every religious effort of humanity has arrived. Obscure and hidden though they may be, these religions have yet drawn from them their real efficacy. Unreasoning

negations on our part can injure them only at the peril of modern civilisation.

God and the soul : these are the two pivots of Christian and Moslem doctrine. Hinduism rejects these notions as being too simple in character. The personal God of the Christian and the Mussulmans is absorbed for the Brahmans and Buddhists in the infinite life of nature, and individual beings appear to them as fleeting pauses in the succession of existences. These lofty doctrines may seem to be contradictory, but they are really the same in principle. Their common basis is, in a purely theoretical point of view, the idea of evolution and order ; in the practical point of view, the idea of sanction and of justice. They have come, thus, to formulating in a manner more or less precise, a general law of cause and effect, of which the play of human conduct exhibits a special case. The processes of the operation vary only with the theologies. The Hindus have sought in the transmigration of souls, the Chinese in the perpetuity of family, the moral sanction which the Semites and the Christians award by their division of the world into the saved and the damned.

All religions present, therefore, some definite view of the universe which is supposed to realise the reign of justice. They aim at the actualisation of the moral world by means of a metaphysics. Now it has come about that this metaphysics has waxed so great, and so complicated itself, as to give rise to a vast *ensemble* of dogmas which have ended in absorbing the religion at their base, and often in completely masking the idea which they were created to serve. Essential, for example, as the dogma of the redemption may be for Christianity, it is, if I dare say so, still not an instrument of divine justice.

The thing of moment, then, is not the particular form in which Buddhists, Christians, and Mussulmans conceive God and the soul, nature and mind, liberty and grace, the absolute and contingent, but the quantity of positive induction which has taken body and life in their symbols. That alone is worth disengaging from the subtleties that have obscured it. Truth should not be suspected because we find it complicated with error. It cannot be that men have placed *nothing* of their common experience in doctrines, be they ever so artificial, which have regulated their conduct for centuries.

Some true facts survive every scientific theory which is abandoned, and enter a new construction having a greater solidity. It is the same with religions—these mixtures of wisdom and illusions.

The future is not bound to the accidental doctrines which the genius of the race has at some period of its development cherished; these doctrines can live only in their heritage, by the actual truths which they have forefelt. The same faith in justice breathes both in the beautiful literary works of antiquity and in those of modern times, and there is perpetuated in them also a philosophy of the world, regarding which we have no right to say that it is absurd.

Still, the scientific verification of traditional thought requires earnest critical work.¹ We cannot gainsay our interest. Reverent though our attitude be towards existing doctrines, the assertion of necessary and universal truths has far more importance for modern societies than the nominal maintenance of dogmatism. There are ruins which one cannot preserve from the injuries of time. Yet for all that humanity will not remain without a guide. What religions did, philosophy, improved and clarified, should now do. It is our task to recover the guiding principles and to produce a new religious sentiment upon the basis of positive knowledge. The work of science will not narrow our horizon but enlarge it. It will not restrict our activity, but will extend it.

¹ See M. Guyau, *L'Irréligion de l'avenir*, (Paris, F. Alcan, 1887). Also the two recent works of M. J. Strada (same publisher), *Jésus et l'Ere de la science* (1896); *La Religion de la science et de l'esprit pur* (1897).